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**HEAR OUR BOYS' VOICES: WHAT HINDERS AND
ENHANCES THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS.**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Massey University, Albany, New Zealand**

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2007**

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made, and has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation or report submitted to this university or to another institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Michael R Irwin
.....

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ABSTRACT

Many boys in New Zealand are having difficulty at school and are not reaching or achieving to their potential. Over the last 30 years there has been an increasing gender gap in education with girls outperforming boys in most curriculum areas. More boys are likely to be disciplined, expelled from school, placed in special education programmes and leave school without qualifications, than girls of the same age and ability.

The aim of this research was to develop a clearer understanding of boys' learning needs and in the process to develop some strategies for improved pedagogy. To achieve this aim and ensure that boys' voices were heard and accurately recorded, boys were trained to be student researchers and consultants within the study. Schools tend to practice a strategy of silence by denying students voice. However students can be valuable collaborators in research and school improvement when given the opportunity.

This thesis recorded the voices of boys from Year level 9, 11 and 13 of three culturally and geographically dissimilar secondary schools. A diverse and broadly representative sample of boys was crucial for the study to establish a boys' perspective on school issues. The methods used to collect boys' experiences and perceptions were individual semi-structured interview, boys' only focus groups and a student motivation measurement. Over 400 boys were involved.

This research established that boys could be taught the skills and abilities to make a valuable contribution as researchers and consultants to the research process. The boys were astutely aware of the issues of education within their school and were able to process information in a responsible and honest manner. There was a uniformity of viewpoint between boys from the three schools and Year levels on ways they perceived factors enhance and hinder their learning. In particular, boys love activity and challenge and require it to engage their body and their mind. A key component to teaching boys is the teacher/boy relationship that establishes a mutual respect, individual care and consistency of expectations. A disturbing revelation is that a number of boys believe that teachers and schools do not expect them to achieve as well as girls. This attitude must be addressed by all concerned with boys' education and well being.

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Boys have been part of my life for 40 years as I worked with them in education, scouting and community youth organisations. These boys, plus my two sons Hamish and Alistair have taught me a lot about fun, laughter, quirky sense of humour, taking risks, accepting a challenge, being loyal and looking after mates. Boys have strong emotions and they express and share these in different ways. I have been privileged to be part of this time with many boys. Without these boys, and the boys in this study I would not have the richness of memories that I cherish. I wish to thank my sons and all these boys.

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This was a huge challenge for me; studying for a doctorate was never one of my goals in life. This is especially so when considering my biggest achievements at school was on the athletics track. School Certificate was a 'just scraped by' mark. I often felt lost and disorganised with school work and unmotivated with study and homework. To this end I must acknowledge the valuable contributions made by my supervisors Associate Professor Ken Ryba and Dr Julianna Raskauskas who have challenged my thinking, extended my knowledge and supported me through to the end. They had a difficult task working with such raw material.

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